Inmates call mural project 'freeing,' 'unifying'

By LAUREN COMSTOCK

Yermo Aranda, foreground, and ten of the 16 artists who worked on 'Sunrise Water Ceremony' listen to Joseph Nichols.

Photos by Kurt Ellison

THE SETTING is the inside of an Indian lodge at sunrise.

A woman sits near the entrance holding a jug of water. In front of her, a man fuels the fire from which a vibrant red and blue "water bird" bursts forth. In the center sits Henry Tyler, a spiritual leader, flanked by a sober comrade on either side. To the far right, beyond a brilliant morning star that shines through an opening in the tepee, one musician beats a drum while another shakes a rattle.

"Morning Water Ceremony" is the title of the 8 × 32-foot mural. Above it, paned windows frame blue sky and white clouds — and a chain-link fence topped with a coil of barbed wire.

The mural, which is painted on a wall of a multipurpose room at Soledad Prison, was dedicated Friday to Henry Tyler, an Arapaho Indian, and the Soledad Native American Spiritual Circle.

Yermo Aranda, a Watsonville artist, and 16 inmates worked on the project, funded by the Prison Arts Project in Santa Cruz, for six months.

"Every mural has a story to tell," Aranda told the 25 or so inmates that lined the walls of the room during the dedication ceremony Friday.

"This one deals with culture, religion," he said. "I feel murals have a certain power to educate, make people aware, help us understand each other.

"I feel if we can understand each other we can live a little more harmoniously together."

A black inmate nodded his head and called out, "That's right."

For the inmates-turned-artists who studied under Aranda and helped with the project, the mural had a harmonizing effect before it was ever completed.

"It's like we've become a big ol' brotherhood, you know?" said Titus Crow of the black, white, Latino, Oriental and Indian inmates who worked together on the mural.

A strapping redhead, Crow said he painted Henry Tyler and the figure to the left of Tyler.

He explained that the inmates, who participated in the program voluntarily and during their free time, learned the basics of sketching and painting during the first four months of Aranda's 10-month contract.

In June, they began work on the mural, which was designed by Aranda.

"They asked us to get some design together, but nobody could agree on anything," Crow said. Aranda finally suggested the water ceremony idea, which was readily accepted by the group.

Crow, who is an illustrator by trade and has a degree from the Institute of Art in San Francisco, said the figures in the mural depicted "spiritual representations" of people Aranda has known and that the inmates themselves had "free reign on interpreting."

The inmates worked for six to seven hours, one day a week, on the mural — hours which came to be very precious.

"I found the painting to be ... an emotional and religious experience for me," said Crow who works as a teacher's aide at Soledad. (Many inmates have a 40-hour-a-week job at the prison.)

Joseph "Yusef" Nichols, an art instructor at the prison with half of his four-year term yet to serve, said working on the mural was "relaxing."

"It's like (being) inside another world," he said. "You don't even realize the time is going by."

Rick Armington arrived at Soledad two months ago and helped put finishing touches on the mural. He studied lithography at the Honolulu Academy of Art and works as a printer at the prison.

"It's like freedom," he said of his work on the mural. "You're freer to do something. With art, you express yourself ... When you're painting, you have a lot of power."

The mural was especially diverting because of the isolated world the inmates face daily.

"It gets you away from being around the guards and the inmates," Crow said. "It gets really boring around here, you can imagine ... There's a lot of life and energy in this."

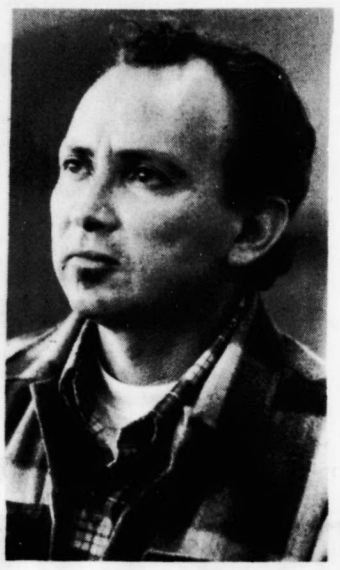
That vitality seemed to extend beyond the circle of 16 artists.

"I've seen guys come and express to me, 'Hey man, this is a good thing here,' " said Nichols, during the dedication ceremony. "A lot of brothers, we feel better around here. We don't have a lot of tension around here like at other penitentiaries."

Herb Matthews, Soledad's community resources manager, and Jack Bowers, the prison's artist facilitator, noted the lessening tension from the administration's point of view.

"Whenever inmates get involved in a program like this," Matthews said, "the disciplinary problems go way down."

Bowers said it was like a "domino effect" from the inmates directly involved in the project outward.



Yermo Aranda

FOR ARANDA, who moved to Watsonville from Southern California a little more than a year ago, working with inmates took some getting used to.

"You get uncomfortable feelings when you go in there, definitely," he said. "You don't know anybody and you know they're definitely not in their for being good guys."

The muralist said that as time went by he got to know the inmates and gained confidence. He said it took about the same amount of time for him to accept them as it did for them to accept him.

By the time of Friday's ceremony, the affection among Aranda and the rest of the artists was evident.

"Being here has been a very rewarding experience in my life," Aranda told the inmates, who applauded as he got up to speak. "I kind of look at this as the completion of a creative cycle."

Later, Aranda said, "In any craft or trade it goes beyond itself to a lot of self-satisfaction at having accomplished something. Something you can see and feel.

"They feel good about themselves. They've accomplished something."

'It gets you away from being around the guards and the inmates. It gets really boring around here, you can imagine ... There's a lot of life and energy in this.'
Titus Crow

Titus Crow paints dedication inscription on mural.

Anger, confusion surround artist's contract termination

Despite the conviviality at the dedication of the "Sunrise Water Ceremony" mural at Soledad Prison Friday, there was an undercurrent of anger about the termination of Yermo Aranda's contract with the Prison Arts Project.

Leo Rios, a Mono Indian and a leader in the prison's Native American Spiritual Circle, said program administrators thought Aranda, who is of Mexican and Native American descent, was "too Indian-oriented."

Rios said Aranda, in addition to suggesting an Indian mural theme, sometimes joined the 30-member religious group at "sweats" — a religious ceremony.

"He's not playing their tune so when his contract came up, they ended it," Rios said.

Gale Gilmore, one of the inmates who worked on the mural, said a letter bearing 200 signatures requesting that Aranda be reinstated or considered for a future contract had been mysteriously lost.

Rios, who praised the mural and Aranda, said the Native American Spiritual Circle plans to circulate a similar letter.

Herb Matthews, community resources manager at the prison, also spoke highly of Aranda.

"Some people think his art is too one-dimensional," he said. "I happen to think since he's been here he's made a great contribution to our art program and I'm going to do everything I can to get him to come back."

Matthews said Aranda was not only proficient as an artist but also had an ability to "pull the inmates together."

Jack Bowers, artist facilitator at the prison, said his understanding of the situation was different and that the decision not to renew Aranda's contract was based on Aranda's failure to meet artistic standards set by the Prison Arts Project.

Ellen Davidson, coordinator for the Prison Arts Project, however, said it was Aranda's decision not to continue with the program.

"The fact of the matter is we gave Guillermo (Aranda) a contract to teach there... The option to renew is his and he chose not to renew it," she said.

As for the mural, Davidson said, "We contracted with Guillermo to teach drawing and painting in a workshop format. His mural was another project and we had nothing to do with that."

Aranda, who was hesitant to comment, said, "All I have to say is it saddens me that we have to deal with these petty things because I feel that program is very important to those inmates and that this kind of thing jeopardizes it."

short takes

Dance classes

Ruth Fisher will offer dance classes for children starting Saturday, through the Watsonville Recreation Department.

Children 3 to 5 years old may enroll in pre-ballet and pre-tap classes, which will meet Saturdays for six weeks from 11:30 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.

Children 6 and older may enroll in ballet and tap classes, which will also meet Saturdays, from 12:15 to 1:15 p.m.

Cost for either session is $12 for Watsonville residents and $14 for non-residents. All classes will meet at Ramsay Park Center.

Registration information is available by calling 728-6081.

Redwood Youth Foundation

A videotape on the 1984 Youth Congress in Santa Cruz will be shown at the Redwood Youth Foundation's first membership meeting Thursday at the Santa Cruz Public Library, 224 Church St.

Also at the meeting, students who traveled to Russia last summer to invite students there to attend this year's Youth Congress will tell about their experiences.

More information is available by calling Barbara Vogel, 476-2905, or Maria Bautista, 724-6078.

Girl Scout cookies

The 1985 Girl Scout cookie sale begins Friday. Girl Scouts will take orders door-to-door through Feb. 27. Delivery to customers and booth sales are scheduled for Feb. 22 to March 10.

An estimated 1,046 girls are expected to participate in the sale in Santa Cruz County. Proceeds will support troop activities, provide camping scholarships and support council-wide programs.

Debt crisis

Jorge Sol and John Cavanaugh will speak on the debt crisis, its origins, impact on Latin America and solutions, at a meeting Thursday sponsored by the Resource Center for Nonviolence.

The free presentation will be given at 8 p.m. in the Crown College Dining Hall at UC-Santa Cruz. More information is available by calling 425-7654.

Genealogy society

Lillian Williams will lead a discussion on the special problems involved in researching genealogy in the Southern states, at the Pajaro Valley Genealogy Society's Thursday meeting. The 7 p.m. meeting will take place in the Watsonville Library.